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ABSTRACT

The time for local groups to pressure local broadcasters for better children's television is now. Federal Communications Commission guidelines encourage broadcasters to involve the community in program planning. And a growing number of groups across the country have been participating. The San Francisco Committee on Children's Television, founded in 1970, has discovered that local involvement can make a difference in local programming. The Committee learned that before a local group can be effective, facts have to be documented. This means watching a lot of children's television and being conversant with the needs, problems and interests of children. Once armed with the facts, specific goals can be established and wide and representative community support can be sought. The final step would be to meet with television station management and the press. (MG)

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CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

The position of the Committee on Children's Television (CCT) of San Francisco, California as presented by Sally Williams to the Third National Symposium On Children and Television, October 15, 16 and 17, 1972 at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut. This paper was prepared by Mrs. Williams in collaboration with Neil Morse and Paul Mundie.

There was a child went forth every day,
and the first object he look'd upon, that object he became,
and that object became part of him for the day or a certain part of the day
or for many years or stretching cycles of years.

Walt Whitman

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A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

Over a decade ago, Newton Minow told broadcasters that the television industry affected more children's hours in America, for good or for evil, than the teachers in our schools. He called upon broadcasters to start illuminating the world for children rather than varying degrees of darkness. He implored broadcasters to light a few million candles to take our children out of the darkness. In the decade that followed, few candles were lit, rather broadcasters attempted to convince the viewing public that television's wasteland was what the public wanted.

These challenges did not fall upon deaf ears. In the past decade, the pioneering actions of several national groups have made it possible for the rest of us to light a few of Mr. Minow's candles. Action for Children's Television has made the nation painfully aware that children have been relegated to the darkest corners of the tube; the United Church of Christ's legal efforts produced the landmark decision which opened the broadcast licensing process to ordinary citizens; and the Citizens' Communication Center's countless hours of legal counsel for local citizens' groups has had a major impact on the broadcasting industry.

The courts have made it clear that it is the right of the

viewer and not the broadcaster that is paramount. The Surgeon General has documented the hazards of today's television fare on the minds of young children, and Commissioner Nicholas Johnson has told us that television viewing may be dangerous to our health, and he has also told us "How To Talk Back To [your] Television Set."

The climate for change has been ably prepared and help on the national level remains available.

It is now up to local groups to take advantage of this climate and to participate in the process of change. Under the American system of broadcasting, every local station must apply for a license to operate in the best interests of the community which the station serves. Thus, local citizens' groups are the logical focal point for improving television.

Broadcasting laws and regulations clearly spell out the obligation of a broadcaster to operate his station in the public interest.

> "When a broadcaster plans what programs his stations will produce or carry each year, he is committed, by FCC rules, to involve the public... his audience... in what is known as 'contributive planning'. In explaining this responsibility, the FCC charged each licensee with 'finding his own path (for programming) with the guidance of those whom his signal is to serve.' To discover this 'path', the Commission proposed that broadcasters begin by: 'first, a canvass of the listening public...' and 'second, consultation with leaders in community life.'" Guide to Citizen Action in Radio and Television, p. 7.

Broadcasting laws were designed to account for a change in a communities' needs and interests by requiring each local station operator to submit a report of this canvassing process to the FCC every three years. This process is known as ascertainment and is part of the public file of every station. Although it is the obligation and responsibility of the broadcaster to serve the community, the viewing public has a responsibility to assist the broadcaster in determining these needs and interests, and, if the broadcaster fails to serve these needs and interests, to report such failure to the FCC.

The San Francisco Committee on Children's Television was formed nearly two years ago to develop a broad base of support from the San Francisco community for the petition for rule-making on children's television filed by Action for Children's Television with the Federal Communications Commission. In the process, the Committee discovered that there were many San Franciscans who were alarmed about the state of children's television but were unaware that they could take action at the local level to improve programs. As a matter of fact, many believed that television began and ended in New York and that the local stations had no responsibility or control over programming. The Committee discovered that local television stations were pleased with the public's lack of awareness, and the interest of a citizens' group in the station's service to children threatened the stations.

CCT quickly learned that a program of local education was necessary in order to generate the kind of public response that was necessary to support the ACT petition. CCT has now been working in this area for over eighteen months and we are glad to have this opportunity to share a few of our lessons with you at this Symposium.

Before a citizens' group can be launched, the facts have to be documented. This means first watching a lot of children's television, reviewing program schedules and examining the stations' public files and exploratory meetings with station management. Once you know who owns and manages your stations and what is behind their programming policies and schedules, you will be ready to analyze and compare the quality of service your children are receiving. Don't be discouraged or dissuaded when you hear remarks like "kids only like cartoons," "it's too expensive for us to do children's programming," or "we have to serve everyone." Don't be fooled by titles like "The Goodstuff Hour" for it's more than likely a cover for some old cartoons that a station would rather not have parents read in the local television guide. Sit down and read a couple of good books about the industry so that you will be conversant with the language of broadcasters. The United Church of Christ has put out a Guide to Citizens' Actions in Radio and Television, which has an excellent bibliography. Nicholas Johnson's informative book, "How

to Talk Back to Your Television Set," also has an excellent bibliography. Remember that you are an advocate of children's rights and you must be conversant with the needs, interests, and problems of children. CCT accomplished this phase of organization by publishing two reports: "Wasteland Revisited", which analyzed programming for children in San Francisco and documented that there had been a sharp decline in programming for children over a ten year period. The second report, "Television and Children's Needs," was an analysis of license renewal applications which confirmed CCT's analysis of station management which had been published in the first report. Station management felt that children's programming was not a priority item, stations had no interest in improving either the quantity or quality of children's programming, stations felt that children were satisfied with cartoon drivel. The renewal applications demonstrated that no station in the Bay Area had made an attempt to fulfill their obligation to ascertain children's needs, nor had they provided the Commission with any reasons for their wholesale deletion of children's programming from their schedules. CCT's contacts with a wide range of community leaders made it feel certain that many needs of children had been totally ignored: Needs associated with a child's emotions, education, sexual development, cultural, ethnic, and national heritage; needs for intellectual growth and the opportunity to acquire a sense of self-worth; needs to learn about one's surroundings

and to have socializing experiences in order to find a place in the surroundings; needs which television can serve through quality children's programming.

After a local citizen's group has gathered facts such as these, the group can start talking. Contact community groups and discuss children's television with them. You may find groups that simply cannot accept the fact that children are such avid TV viewers and they throw up their arms and state that the only way to deal with television is to turn it out of the house. Your job is to convince them that this is not solving the problem for anyone nor is it utilizing the creative potential of the media. There will be other groups who will find your message very discomforting for television viewing has become so central in their lives that the only other activity they engage in for a longer period of time is sleeping. "What can we do!" will become a cry that will haunt you. Currently, CCT is handling this cry by urging people to write to the FCC in support of the ACT petition for rulemaking. We also encourage people to write and call their local station when they see a program that pleases them or offends them. Lights on the switchboard are read like ratings. People who wish to become more involved have acted as monitors for CCT. These monitors are trained by a professional consultant to look at children's programming for techniques that the programs use to resolve conflict. They also check on ethnic, sex role

and cultural sterotypes. This fall, we plan to train local parents to serve as discussion facilitators who can go into the community and work with groups to help them have a more effective voice for better broadcasting as well as increase their awareness of the uses and abuses of television. Among community groups, CCT has found that there are people who are professionally involved with children who need to be encouraged to translate their knowledge into information which television stations can use when developing and selecting programming. For example, mental health specialists are aware of the impact of television on children, but don't know to use their knowledge and expertise to improve children's programming. As you are talking in the community, don't forget to ask for the written endorsement and comments from each group or person with whom you have discussed children's television.

Now your group has standing. You have the facts, you have established goals, and you have the community behind you. Now is the time to start serious discussions with local station management. It is most helpful to involve a team of well-informed children's advocates who represent a wide cross section of the community in these discussions. Prepare your agenda in advance and agree on the issues. When meeting with a station, and the management says that they'd like to do more programming for children, or that they'd like the networks and other program suppliers to provide better programming, or that their company is developing a policy in an area affecting children -

say advertising practices - ask the station to put it into memo for you. Keep good files and keep the public informed. Press conferences are a necessary part of your activity. When warranted, send copies of your correspondence with stations to the FCC. When CCT filed its original station evaluation reports with the FCC and asked that they be included in the license renewal application file for each station, the local stations realized the seriousness of our efforts. Not only were stations reacting to CCT more positively, but stations found that they had to defend their policies to the FCC.

When CCT began its discussions with stations, the climate for change was not as well established as it is today. CCT found that some stations' disregard of the public had gone so far that CCT felt that it was incumbent on it to ask the FCC to reaffirm the fundamental principle of the Communications Act that the responsibility for television program service lies with the individual licensee and that the licensee must act in the public interest to serve the needs of the various elements of its audience. The FCC's Procedural Manual for Citizen's groups and their Primer on Ascertainment of Community Problems are the two documents upon which CCT drew its legal basis for filing a petition ~~for~~ today the renewal of the license of a San Francisco television station. CCT's petition, together with others that were filed, made the local broadcasters much more interested in public issues. Tokenism is still, however, the most common response. Significant changes require long and

arduous work. However, when public concern is aroused and when the future of the children in a community is at stake, interested citizens are a tenacious and persuasive group. CCT was able to obtain local pro bona legal services and a lot of sound legal advice from the dedicated lawyers at the Citizen's Communication Center in Washington D.C. (Possible sources of legal help are set forth in the United Church of Christ's Guide.)

We are still trying to light a candle or two -- preferably five, one for each of the stations in the Bay Area. We think that we are coming closer. In 1971, Bay Area television stations did not produce any local programming for children; programming that could have reflected the rich cultural and ethnic diversity of the children of the Bay Area. Now, seven and one-half hours are produced locally. In 1971, the stations had never worked on a cooperative project for children. Now there is an inter-station committee that works with CCT Advisors in the development of public service announcements for children that deal with nutrition and consumerism. In 1971, no station had ever utilized a community representative in the development of a program idea. Now several stations have called on members of the CCT Advisory Board and on other members of the community. In 1971 no station had any of its production staff involved in children's programming. Now they do and the staffs find it challenging and rewarding work. In 1971, it would have been treason for a station to think of not clearing programming from

a network, this year two stations asked community groups for their opinions. It is not nirvana. Some of the local programming is little more than cartoons with a nicer cover. Few of the people involved in the production of children's programs represent minority groups, and thus far, all of the network children's shows are on the air despite the fact that minority groups have asked certain programs be taken off the airwaves.

CCT will continue its efforts and it will light those candles to take San Francisco children out of the darkness. We will spend undaunted energy providing the community with information about the possibilities that could be available to children through television and we will spend endless hours working with other groups in the community so that they will develop an effective and sustained interest in children and television so that local stations won't have to find themselves lacking in a population to ascertain or to consult as they develop and select programming.

This is the year for children. Don't let it pass without taking the ACT standard to your community.